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SUBJECT: MINISTER SHARANSKY: PA ELECTIONS A GOOD START, BUT
PALESTINIANS NEED INDEPENDENT MIDDLE CLASS

Classified By: Ambassador Daniel C. Kurtzer for reasons 1.4 (b,d).

1. (C) Summary: Minister Natan Sharansky told the Ambassador January 10 that the Palestinian elections were important in that they have led to new leadership and opportunities. He added, however, that he could not refer to the elections as "free or democratic" given the "fear" that exists in Palestinian society. Sharansky referred to his November 11 meeting with President Bush, and noted that the President and he had agreed that peace would come from promoting democracy in the region. Sharansky opined that newly-elected PA President Abu Mazen should be strengthened, but complained that Abu Mazen has done little to curb incitement against Israel. The Ambassador underscored that the PA and Israel each have responsibilities to undertake in order to advance the peace process. Among them, he noted, is for the PA to strengthen the rule of law on the street and for Israel to curb provocation and violence by extremist settlers.

2. (U) Summary cont'd: Sharansky, an opponent of disengagement, who is not a Knesset member, noted to the Ambassador that Likud's Central Committee agreed January 6 to the merger of his Yisrael B'Aliya party with Likud, which would add what Sharansky said are 128 disengagement opponents to the Likud Central Committee. The Yisrael B'Aliya Central Committee will vote on the merger on or about January 16. Minister Sharansky was accompanied by his advisor, Aryeh Green. End summary.

Elections Are a Start

3. (C) Minister-Without-Portfolio Natan Sharansky used his new book, "The Case for Democracy: The Power of Freedom to Overcome Tyranny and Terror" as a backdrop to his January 10 meeting with the Ambassador, stressing the importance of supporting democracy, including in Iraq, in order to promote peace in the region. Sharansky referred to his November 11 meeting with President Bush, noting with pleasure that President Bush told him that his book provides the theoretical basis for many of the President's instincts. Sharansky noted that while he does not believe the January 9 PA elections were "free and democratic" because of the "fear" that exists in Palestinian society, he believes the elections were a good start, in that they resulted in a new leadership that can now advance democracy. The Palestinians, he underlined, "have a very good chance of developing a democracy since they have an educated middle class." Sharansky stressed the importance of nurturing an independent Palestinian middle class, and of breaking the economic "monopoly" of three or four Palestinian families. While he complained that newly-elected PA president Abu Mazen has not done enough to curb Palestinian religious incitement against Israel, Sharansky underlined that Abu Mazen should be strengthened.

4. (C) The Ambassador noted that participants in the recent Oslo donors meeting voiced their willingness to provide substantial assistance to the PA with the condition that this assistance be tied to reform. He said that Palestinians have responsibilities to fulfill in order to move the peace process forward, including instituting judicial reform, installing an effective police force and removing weapons from the street. The Ambassador said that Israel also has responsibilities in the process, such as curbing provocations and violence by extremist settlers. As an example, the Ambassador noted that the GOI could prevent incidents such as that where settlers attacked members of an NGO who were helping Palestinian residents tend to their olive groves. Sharansky said he was not aware of these attacks, and asked his advisor, Aryeh Green, to provide him with more information.

Sharansky Adds Support to Anti-Disengagement Likudniks

5. (SBU) Sharansky highlighted the January 6 Likud Central Committee decision to approve the merger of Sharansky's Russian immigrant-based Yisrael b'Aliya Party with Likud. The merger, Sharansky noted, adds 128 anti-disengagement members to Likud's Central Committee.

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KURTZER